

# Valediction

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As I prepare to move into a new phase of my scholarly life, my message of farewell to my Area Studies colleagues has to begin with an expression of sincere gratitude for the acceptance and kindness they have shown me. In the Japanese language context of our department I have been essentially illiterate and inarticulate, and that must have caused considerable trouble for everyone.

On the positive side, however, there has been—for me—an unexpected benefit to my Komaba life of perplexity. As some of you may know, my academic field is literary geography, a doubly interdisciplinary academic practice which engages with two subjects and two academic traditions: on the one hand, literary texts and literary studies, and on the other hand, the geographies of our lived world and the academic field of human geography. As someone originally trained in literary criticism and literary history, my biggest challenge when starting out as a literary geographer was gaining some basic understanding of the always-evolving spatial theories, concepts and vocabularies fundamental to anglophone human geography. And this is where my experience surviving daily life at Komaba in a condition of confusion has been so useful, because it turns out that it enabled me to develop a high tolerance for bewilderment and an unexpected facility for muddling along in the face of limited comprehension.

The approach to literary geography that has been most exciting for me is one that focuses on the way in which texts come to life in the collaboration, across space and time, of multiple actors, including authors, editors, publishers, booksellers, critics, reviewers, readers, teachers and students. For me, this is the most interesting geographical aspect of the literary text: not the locations of fictional settings, or the geo-biographies of authors, but the complicated geography of texts as they unfold and regenerate in space-time. In thinking of the text in this way, as a spatial event, I have relied on my limited understanding of Actor-Network Theory—one of those intimidating academic methods I would probably have avoided had I not been toughened up by the perplexities of my daily life at Komaba.

My interest in ANT started with a discussion I overheard at a conference, about scientific research into scallop fishing. A group of geographers were talking about a scientific study which had looked at the interaction of three groups—fishermen, scientists, and scallops—and had ex-

explored how each of these actors had their own agency and their own motives: for the fishers, profit; for the scientists, knowledge of scallops, and for the scallops, survival. I went away thinking about this. How could scallops have agency? Did their interlocking involvement in such a *scallop-fishing-research network* show how actors come into being in networks? Or did ‘actor-network’ here indicate that it was actually the network which had a collective agency?

Developed in the 1980s in Paris by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, in collaboration with the visiting British sociologist John Law, ANT is an anti-essentialist approach which tracks the interaction of entities and phenomena through their relations with other entities and phenomena, both human and non-human, becoming visible as aspects of networks. I don’t think I will ever fully grasp the complexity of actor-network theory, but on the strength of my Komaba practice in *muddling along* I was eventually able to import some of its basic ideas into the study of literary geography, drawing on four key points: (1) challenging binaries, (2) looking for explanations that are contingent and contextual (3) regarding phenomena as precarious and always in the process of being performed and sustained, and (4) questioning the location of agency. Applying what I was able to understand about actor-network theory to literary geography enabled me to think of the literary text as itself something of an actor-network—a phenomenon which comes into being relationally, in the interaction of multiple collaborating agents stretched out across space and time. This is the approach underpinning my 2014 study *Literary Geographies: Narrative Space in Let The Great World Spin*, which explores themes in literary geography through a study of Colum McCann’s 2009 prize-winning novel. One of the reasons I chose to work with this text was McCann’s belief that his work ‘is completed only when it is finished by a reader.’ Themes discussed in the study included fictional setting, intertextuality and literary space, but also the geographies of authorial inspiration and the writing process, the geographies of book production and promotion, and various forms of reader reception.

Literary geography, like any academic endeavour, is precarious and always in process, dependent on human creativity and scholarship but also on non-human processes and technologies. The interdiscipline of literary geography, practiced in scholarly collaborations across space and time, seems to me to function itself as a kind of actor-network challenging various binaries, not least that which conventionally separates the sciences and the humanities. In future I hope to continue with the adventures with theory and method in literary geography that have been so generously facilitated over the past two decades by my Komaba colleagues.